

## CITY OF BALTIMORE

MARTIN O'MALLEY, Mayor



## HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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### EARLY DETECTION OF HIV: BACKGROUND SHEET

#### SUMMARY

The City of Baltimore is implementing a new laboratory testing system that uses HIV RNA screening to detect HIV infections within days or weeks after they occur. By using this new lab tool in HIV testing from patients in the STD clinics, patients will get more accurate results and the health department will better target HIV prevention resources in the community.

#### WHAT IS THE NEW LAB TEST?

HIV RNA tests ("viral loads") have been used for 10 years in HIV clinics and in blood banks to screen pooled donor specimens for HIV.

#### WHY IS THIS TEST BETTER?

It takes at least 3-4 weeks for a person with recent HIV to make antibodies detected by standard HIV antibody tests, which has been called the "window period." RNA tests can identify infection at an earlier stage and give a more accurate result.

#### WHAT IS POOLED TESTING?

Blood banks perform the test on pools created from the blood of a large number of individuals. If a pool is positive, then each sample contributing to the pool is tested separately to identify the HIV infected individual. The pooling process in the laboratory allows for a more efficient and lower cost system of RNA testing.

#### ARE OTHER HEALTH DEPARTMENTS DOING THIS?

This has been routine for several years in North Carolina. Recently, other health departments including New York and San Francisco are piloting programs that utilize HIV RNA testing to identify very early HIV infection.

#### WHAT DO YOU EXPECT TO BE THE BENEFITS?

- **Improving outreach efforts**- We will be able to point HIV outreach workers to "hot spots" of HIV transmission in the community.
- **Prevention of new infections** -Those with acute HIV infection are 10 times more infectious to others than later after HIV antibody is formed. Knowledge of HIV infection at this stage will be critical in preventing transmission to others.
- **Accurate partner notification** - Early detection of HIV status will help to more effectively identify and locate exposed persons who are in the sexual and needle-sharing networks that spread HIV.
- **Earlier treatment** - Detecting acute HIV infection will allow those with HIV to benefit from HIV medical care earlier.

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